

*Background Photo Omitted*

# Talking Turkey

*More Than a Half-Century Later*

By Ron Wilson

*In some parts of North Dakota, wild turkeys – from the birds roaming urban neighborhoods to those roosting in river bottom cottonwoods – are so everyday they don't even earn a rubberneck from passersby.*

But it hasn't always been that way. There was a time, more than a half-century ago, the curious had to travel elsewhere, beyond North Dakota's borders to spy one of these wild, naked-headed birds. Like ring-necked pheasants, Hungarian partridge, trout and chinook salmon, wild turkeys are not native to North Dakota, but introduced.

Attempts were made in the 1930s and 1940s, according to historians, to stock turkeys in North Dakota. The birds didn't stick, however, and it wasn't until the early 1950s that efforts to introduce this bird turned serious. The charge was led by the Missouri Slope Chapter of the Izaak Walton League. Turkey eggs and adults birds were purchased and pen-raised, with the first significant releases into the wild made in 1952 along the Heart and Missouri rivers and some southwestern counties.

*"Considerable planning has gone into this program, spearheaded by transplanted southerners among the (Izaak Walton League) membership, who know and admire the game qualities of the wild turkey in their native states. Common belief is that the turkey will not find the winter snows and available winter food to their liking. However, the Ikes are not going to let it go at guessing. They are going to find out ..."* according to April 1952 *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists contended at the time that while they weren't against the group's effort to introduce turkeys into the state, there was concern about spending sportsmen's dollars in an attempt to introduce yet another game bird species.

*"In addition, while it is quite possible that the turkey will live in the areas stocked by the Missouri Slope Chapter, the Department feels that the amount of suitable habitat in our state is far too small to allow the turkey to increase to a point where an open season would be possible. For that reason alone, the state Game and Fish Department must keep hands off ..."* according to April 1952 *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

As we know today, open wild turkey seasons in North Dakota did follow, the first being in 1958. That year, 376 turkey licenses were issued and hunters bagged 88 birds.

Whether wild turkeys were introduced a half-century ago into North Dakota, or today, the biologist's take would still be the same, said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. "Biologists today would view the introduction of any species in a similar light," he said. "There must be reasons why the birds aren't here in the first place. So, you'd want to proceed with caution with introducing an animal that doesn't naturally occur."

If you consider that wildlife habitat consists of four things – food, water, shelter and space – there's good reason why wild turkeys are not native to North Dakota. "We still don't have the habitat to sustain a truly wild population of turkeys," Kreil said. "The only reason the population exists is through the tolerance of landowners who allow the birds a source of winter feed."

---

*The wild turkey is a polygamous species. Each male will attempt to attract and mate with as many as five females. Young are hatched after about a 28-day incubation period.*





---

***Turkey tolerance among landowners varies. Some people really like having some birds hanging around, while others don't want any, which is understandable.***

---

If turkeys had to make it all on their own – without the assistance of crop fields and stored livestock food supplies – it just wouldn't happen because of a lack of a reliable winter food source. "If you're missing one of the four habitat components, an animal is not going to survive without some human intervention," Kreil said.

The introduction of wild turkeys to North Dakota was a good thing if you enjoy hunting. "It's a new species that offered new challenges," Kreil said. "But if you're a livestock producer who has 200 turkeys in his winter feed supplies, you may look at it differently."

Turkey tolerance among landowners varies. Some people really like having some birds hanging around, while others don't want any, which is understandable. Deer-proof hay yards are good for keeping deer out of livestock feed supplies, but offer little obstacle for the winged birds that, among other things, dig and scratch in the stored cattle feed.

*"I do not have any turkeys on my place nor do I want any. If they come here or are planted, I plan to have them moved or disposed of. They are just going to cause damage to my crops and livestock feed and attract hunters that will cause still more damage,"* reported a Flasher area landowner (1960) in *Feathers from the Prairie*.

Part of the birds' habituation to farmsteads in winter has to do with their roots, said Lowell Tripp, Department upland game management biologist in Oakes. "Unfortunately, they (Izaak Walton League) started with pen-raised birds," he said. "If we could have started with true wild turkeys and established a population, they would be wild and not want to hang around the farmsteads."

For the first time in 2003, all of North Dakota was open to fall wild turkey hunting. Existing hunting units were expanded and much of the central and eastern parts of the state, never open to hunting before, was designated a hunting unit to encourage harvest



on isolated, but growing flocks of turkeys. The season was also extended two weeks in January to increase pressure on turkeys as they move into farmstead livestock feed supplies.

"We're not sure it's a great thing to have turkey hunting opportunities statewide," Kreil said. "Frankly, we have turkeys in places where turkeys don't belong. Someone at sometime decided they wanted turkeys around for whatever reason, the birds got away from them and became 'wild,' so now we have isolated pockets of turkeys causing problems in places that don't even resemble turkey habitat."

Kreil said Department wildlife managers would prefer not to have turkeys in places like Napoleon, Hamberg, or on the prairie north of Jamestown. "However, now that those birds are there through no action of the Department, we have an obligation and responsibility to manage those populations," he said.

North Dakota's first fall turkey season was held more than 40 years ago. But it wasn't until the late 1970s the state held its first spring gobbler season.

*"Because this will be something totally different for North Dakota there will, no doubt, be many skeptics. However, while it will be new to North Dakota it has been traditional in some states for many years,"* wrote Bruce Renhowe in March 1976 *North Dakota OUT-DOORS*.

The first spring season wasn't well received, Tripp said, as landowners, for one, were skeptical about having hunters around disturbing cattle during prime calving time. "What landowners found out was that it was a pretty low-key hunt and hunters didn't disturb their cattle," he said. "Spring turkey hunting gets more popular ever year."

Spring hunting of any kind wasn't part of North Dakota's culture, Kreil said, and efforts to implement a spring turkey season nearly 30 years ago was a challenge. "Now the



Craig Bihle

---

*North Dakota Game and Fish Department personnel have used rocket nets to trap hundreds of wild turkeys over the years, before moving them elsewhere. The difficulty is finding suitable habitat where the relocated birds won't cause some of the same problems – marauding stored winter livestock feed supplies – as where they were trapped.*

---





Craig Bhirle

*This seemingly shy gobbler hides its head while roosting in a tree. Trees available for roosting are just one of the ingredients of good turkey habitat, something North Dakota is lacking.*

spring season is one our most popular seasons and landowners have come to realize the methods involved in spring turkey hunting – one person calling, not groups of hunters pushing birds – are very different from hunting deer, pheasants, or whatever game in the fall,” he said. “It’s a very unobtrusive sport.”

The first spring season was a limited hunt, with 22 hunters killing nine male birds.

*“There has been some discussion concerning the ‘whys’ of holding a spring gobbler season. Turkeys are a polygamous bird. That is, like pheasants, one male will service a harem of hens. Information received from our fall seasons indicate that approximately 50 percent of our harvest, at that time of year, is made up of hens. The result is that we are carrying more males than are needed for breeding purposes ... The surplus gobblers are birds that are competing for food and cover with the productive portion of our turkey flocks. Their loss will have no impact on the growth of our wild population,”* Tripp wrote in March 1983 *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

The state’s turkey hunting contingent continues to grow, with some hunters more passionate about hunting these exotic birds than others. Kevin Lockard of Bismarck is one of those people who believe North Dakota’s outdoors is a better place because of wild turkeys. “The North Dakota landscape would be empty without them,” he said. “I would miss it terribly not to be able to drive a mile south of town and not see big, ol’ gobblers in full strut.”

To Lockard, hunting turkeys is a family thing. A couple of seasons ago, his son, Mike, 17, called a bird in so close during a spring hunt, the turkey ended up pecking his boot. “We don’t even need guns or tags to ‘hunt’ these birds,” Lockard said. “We just get a kick of being out in the woods and ‘talking’ with the birds with our calls.”

Hunting turkeys in the spring when the birds are more vocal is Lockard’s preference. But chasing the birds in fall has its merits, too. “The birds are talking in the fall, but they’re just saying different things. It’s more of a challenge, maybe, to hunt these birds then because you’re at the mercy of the North Dakota weather,” he said.

Turkey hunting can be as challenging as you want it to be. Lockard knows of a dozen farms he could go to in winter and shoot a bird as it makes its rounds to livestock feed supplies. Or he can dress from head to toe in camouflage, settle in against a stump and go one-on-one with prey that’s known for

having incredible eyesight and hearing.

“The calling is such a rush ... and the reward is when the bird comes in,” he said. “Once you get that bird in sight, the intensity picks up as you can watch the bird and how it responds when you’re talking to it.”

These encounters many times bring the hunter and turkey eye-to-eye. “Sometimes you’ll get a bird that will lock up and not come in real close, but typically we don’t shoot birds over 15-20 feet,” Lockard said. “But even if we don’t pull the trigger, we’ve still had a great time because we’ve learned something. It’s the overall understanding of turkeys, how they communicate to other birds, and how they respond to us that’s all part of the fun.”

Starting in 1958, the Department began trapping turkeys from areas where the birds had wore out their welcome, then moved them into existing populations, or into areas without birds that offered suitable habitat. Turkey trapping, however, is expensive, time consuming and doesn’t always work well. “Sometimes it comes down to taking birds from your place where they are a problem and putting them on my place where they become a problem,” Tripp said.

The Department continues to handle requests from wildlife clubs and landowners who want Game and Fish to stock birds into their areas. “We are very reluctant, very selective and very firm in our approach to these requests,” Kreil said. “It’s a tough combination to find suitable locations where turkeys won’t cause problems and everybody agrees to having them around.”

Today, wild turkeys are moving into urban areas where they are welcomed by some and ushered away by others. “In all these instances there are people who like the birds and go out of their way to provide food and protection, while their neighbors are upset about turkey droppings on the sidewalks, cars being scratched and gardens being torn up. The thing is, turkeys don’t belong in town,” Kreil said.

They belong in what passes as wild country in North Dakota today. Country where they can strut during the day and fly down from tall roosts at dawn, noisily hitting the ground like sacks of cement.

**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



## Turkey Tracks

- 1930s-40s – First attempts to release turkeys in North Dakota, but birds didn't stick.
- 1952 – First earnest efforts begin to release turkeys in North Dakota.
- 2,222 – Total number of turkeys released in North Dakota from 1952-1963.
- 148 – Total number of releases in North Dakota from 1952-1963.
- 7,437 – Estimated number of dollars spent on turkey releases in North Dakota from 1952-63.
- 3,000 – Estimated wild turkey population (compiled by Izaak Walton League) in North Dakota in 1956.
- 1958 – First wild turkey season held.
- 88 – Number of birds bagged in inaugural season.
- 0 – No birds were bagged in 1959-60 because wild turkey seasons were not held in state.
- 1976 – First spring wild turkey season held in North Dakota.
- 9 – Number of gobblers bagged first spring season.
- 1,638 – Number of turkeys trapped and transplanted in North Dakota from 1972-87.
- 1980 – First time more than 1,000 wild turkey permits issued to hunters.
- 736 – Number of turkeys killed during 1980 season.
- 3,710 – Number of wild turkey licenses available for spring 2003 season, up 400 from 2002.
- 9,095 – Number of wild turkey licenses available for fall 2003 season.
- 2,485 – Difference between fall 2002 licenses (6,610) and fall 2003 licenses (9,095).
- 2003 – First year entire state open to fall wild turkey hunting.



Harold Umber

### Spring Turkey Deadline Nears

The application deadline for a 2004 spring turkey license is February 11. Application forms are available at most license vendors, county auditors and Game and Fish offices. Prospective gobbler hunters can also apply online on the Department's website at [discovernd.com/gnf](http://discovernd.com/gnf), or over the phone at 800-406-6409. Online or phone applications must be logged by 11:59 p.m. that day.

Spring turkey licenses are available only to North Dakota residents. An \$8 fee must accompany the application. The season opens April 10. Other season details were not finalized as this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* went to press.